Commercial catch - Best way to catch a crab?

Crabs are caught in pots or traps. These are a highly selective method of fishing where undersized animals including ‘soft’ or moulting crabs can be returned to the sea alive. In the Inshore Potting Agreement (IPA) area, fishers often use inkwell pots traditional to South Devon.

Parlour and creel pots with soft net entrances don’t allow small crabs to escape. If these types of pots are used, they are required to be fitted with escape gaps which allow small and non-target species to escape before being hauled on-board, seen in the image below. (Image Courtesy of Devon & Severn IFCA, 2012).

Species Facts

- Brown crabs mature after 10 years and on average live for about 30 years - some have been known to live until they are 100!
- Sexual maturity is reached after about 10 years
- A mature adult may have a shell width of up to 25cm (10 in) - about the size of a dinner plate.
- Widely distributed in coastal waters of the Mediterranean, Atlantic, English Channel and North Sea in depth range of 0-100m, usually 6-40m
- The brown crab is a scavenger and active predator which uses its pincers to crush the shells of its prey: commonly snails, crabs and even smaller brown crabs.
- The brown crab is mainly nocturnal; research suggests this is to reduce risk of predation from cod and seals.

Management

Brown crab have been harvested from the inshore waters of South Devon for hundreds of years and supports one of the largest brown crab potting fleets in the UK.

Whilst more research and stronger management is needed in many regions in the UK, the IPA area is considered to be sustainably fished. Stable catch and recruitment rates over several years indicate the sustainability of the fishery and the success of the measures employed within the IPA.

A minimum legal size (MLS) is in place throughout the UK – ranging between 11.5 and 14cm, yet within the IPA area, an MLS of 14cm for females and 16cm for males is in place – the largest in the UK. This gives the crabs plenty of time to grow and reproduce before ending up on the dinner plate. The landing of egg bearing hens (female crab) and soft-shelled crab is prohibited nationally.

Bans on using edible crabs as bait, and on landing of ‘claws only’ also applies for most regions.

Best time to eat

Brown crabs are caught all year round, but are most abundant and best to eat in Spring, Summer and Autumn. Avoid eating crabs during Winter spawning months.